The Computer Question

The verdict is still out on the overall effect of computers on our youth. Personal computers have not been in our homes long enough to understand their long-range consequences on the minds of our children, but much is being researched, and statistics abound.

- 87% of 12-17 year-olds use the internet—the highest age range of all Americans.
- 39% of children 3-11 are online regularly.
- 87% of 8-17 year-olds play video games at home. 7 out of 10 report that they play M-rated games—a vast majority being boys.

I hear complaints daily from parents who are exhaustively battling media influence. But many parents don't even bother to fight since:

- 69% of children 6-14 have TV and internet access in their bedrooms,
- 28% of parents don't know if their children talk to strangers online,
- 42% of parents do not review what their teens read or write in chat rooms or via instant messaging and
- 95% of parents don't know how to interpret chat room lingo.

Instant messaging has created a new form of relating; one in which the consequences of the communication are not experienced in the same way as with spoken language. Communication gets warped when children write what they would never say. Text communication is often misunderstood since it does not relay the intonations of spoken words. Messages are sent into cyberspace with little personal responsibility for how words affect the receiver or at what cost to the sender. Dire consequences are in the news daily. Venturing this relatively new territory, parents are at a loss as to how to protect their children from hurtful communication among friends, not to mention on-line predators.

Sitting in front of a screen for hours a day leads to both mental isolation and the desire for accelerated brain stimulation. In order to maintain the attention of the average observer, on screen images per second have gotten faster and faster. While research has not decidedly linked screen viewing and attention

deficit disorders, most would agree that learning disorders have become epidemic since personal computers have been in the majority of homes.

Computers have brought universal information and worldwide communication to our fingertips. And rightly so, schools are begging for more and more classroom computers and programs. Clearly computer knowledge is essential for our students to succeed in almost any area. But with all this should come many questions. Is it right to have young children learning from computers rather than warm bodies? How early should we introduce them into the classroom? What is the effect on mental processing? Do computers change the way we relate to each other? Are relational disorders on the rise due to the isolation of computer communication?

In the race for best overachiever, zealous parents are buying computer products even for their infants, craving every advantage for their child's rise to the top of the competitive heap. Video games address all subjects making learning a game for kids averse to books and reading—a good thing for children with reading difficulties. But is it the chicken or the egg? Again, there are questions to consider. How are computers affecting the learning processes of children's minds? Are attention disorders commensurate with computer use? The answers are not in, and until they are, caution must prevail.

When schools ask for laptop computers for every child, we need not only consider how computers are affecting our children's learning and relationships but what personal ownership would mean on the home front. Parents, already in daily battles with their children demanding more screen time, will have an even harder job establishing restrictions on computer use when schools are handing them out clearly condoning their use? Imagine the argument from a child? *But mom, the school wants me to have it. I can use it however I want. Butt out.* Is a parent to watch over the child's shoulder to make sure his school-bought computer is used only for educational purposes? How does a decision of this magnitude affect the parent/child relationship?

Young children at least up to high school age often misplace and lose their belongings and do not take full responsibility for valuable items. This is not their fault but their developmental handicaps. Why set children (and their parents) up for problems when, at ages as young as ten, they are given responsibility for their

own laptops? What happens when one is lost or stolen? Is the school responsible for replacing it? If not, isn't that child put at a disadvantage?

Why not use tax dollars to fund computers for use by all students but keep them in school classrooms and computer labs where they are under educational supervision? And why not keep young children, at least through middle school, in face-to-face communication with human beings more than 50% of the time so that social relations are valued as highly as information?

We must never lose sight of the importance of the emotional life of a child laid on a foundation of meaningful relationships with caring adults. Brains are not fully developed until the age of twenty-one. Until then, making good decisions, taking responsibility, and delaying gratification—the most important components of healthy adults—is precarious at best and must be guided and nurtured by other human beings in physical contact with emotional responses.